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## SALON OF THE DILETTANTI—IV

### ART SALES AND SIGNATURES

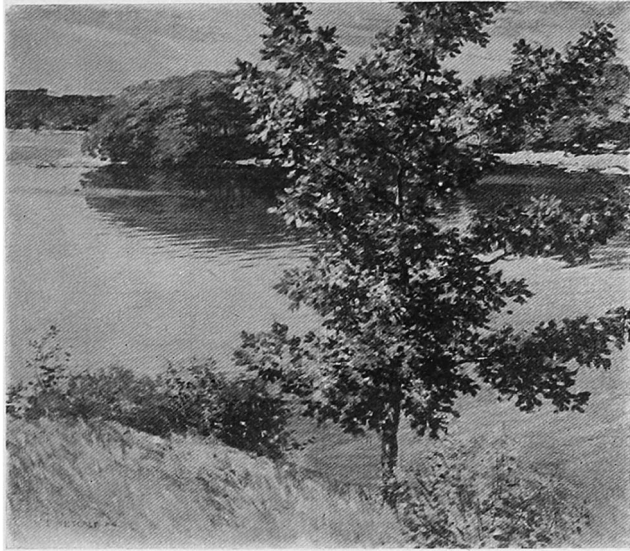
It was one of the delicate questions of casuistry, the Observer remarked, to what extent a name warped public appreciation of a work of art. Rembrandt and Reynolds, Constable and Corot, Israels and Inness, Millet and Martin, Wyant and Weissenbruch, Daubigny, Diaz, Monet, Mauve, — these and many another, on the lips of a clever salesman, were symbols to conjure with. But Jones, Johnson, Brown and Smith — again those impersonal verbal tokens for the Saleless Sports of Fortune — who could get up any enthusiasm over their work, or conscientiously urge a loosening of purse strings in their interest? The former were dead or “discovered,” and the latter were neither. God helping them, they would be some day—dead; but, “discovered” — a long, long chance, like drought in April.

Wherefore this mysterious connection between sales and signatures? Was it merit, fashion, business, whim? Did collectors, as a rule, buy names or pictures, were they real, *bona fide* “patrons of art,” or only shrewd, every-day speculators? The Observer had never been able to decide definitely but he had his opinion. He had noticed that collectors never—well, modify the phrase, and say rarely—enthused over *live* artists of mere promise but usually over *dead* artists likely to be scarce; never—again say rarely, if you please—over “undiscovered”



THE RIALTO  
By Conlin Campbell Cooper

painters of ability, but over "discovered" men, well exploited, with little or no regard to merit. He had noticed that art sales—those auction events that betokened recent demise, or simply an unloading preparatory to new investments—were always heralded by a citation of names, and not by a eulogy of quality and interest; and he was therefore led to suspect that in the common estimate there was some intimate connection, either of psychology or profit, between the merit of a canvas and the sig-



THE YOUNG OAK  
By Willard L. Metcalf

nature it bore—a theory which, in point of fact, he, for one, was not willing to accept. It savored too much, he said, of the shop-talk of trade.

Whistler's butterfly, for instance,—if genuine—applied to a Dabo nocturne would enhance its "value" from hundreds—possibly even from tens—to thousands of dollars, without adding one inch to its size or one iota to its quality of tone or texture. This, he thought, was one of the unexplainable miracles, like the transformation of water into wine by the mumbling of a spell or the making of a cabalistic sign. Perhaps, he ventured to suggest, it was the profit—to somebody—resulting from an artist's making a show of himself in life and then being accommodating enough to shuffle off the coil, as Shakespeare puts it.

Recently, at public auction, a Mauve sold for \$40,200. The price asked not so many years ago, when the canvas was a medal winner at the

Paris Salon, was \$300. Mauve was a very prolific painter, and only died in 1888. Did a few years' aging — and the demise of the artist — add \$39,900 to the beauty and intrinsic value of the canvas? Did the purchaser buy the picture or the name? Did he have, at heart, appreciation of the art — \$40,200 worth — or, in mind, another sale at the price paid — plus? Was it possible for human agency to put \$40,200 worth of acutal value into a three-foot square of canvas with brush] and



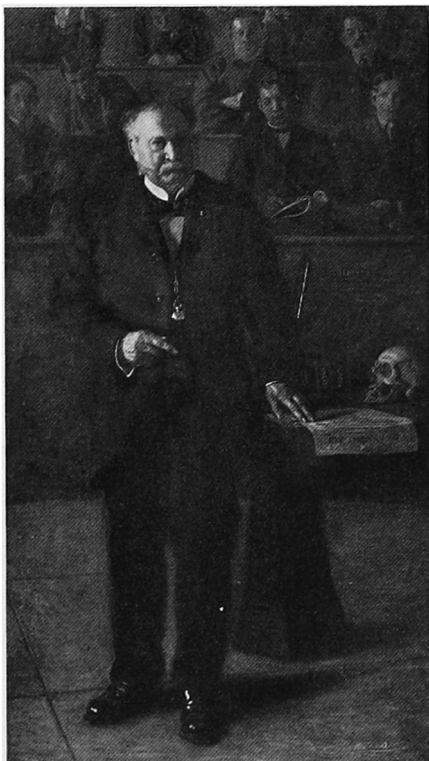
THE NAUTILUS  
By Hugh H. Breckenbridge

pigment? At the very moment the Salon of the Dilettanti was in session an El Greco was being offered to a Western museum for \$40,000, the price of forty American pictures of superb quality and commanding interest. Name or picture? Was it worth that price as a work of art? Was it worth it to an institution struggling to get out of debt? Was it worth it to the people who voluntarily subscribed, or willy-nilly paid taxes for the support of the institution? Was it worth it to the visitors who crowded the galleries on free days, or paid their quarters on days not free?

*Vanitas vanitatum*, thundered the Observer. Names, names, nothing but — little but — names! Names captured the checks, and in the mean time, works of art, calculated by their inherent beauty, truth, purity, reverence — their message from God to man — to touch the heart and

exalt the soul, were gathering soot and cobwebs in the studios. In the mean time, the dead slept on in dust their sleep of eternity, little dreaming of, and nothing profiting by, the glory with which Trade had crowned them, and the "discovered" and exploited made their bank deposits, and the able Unloved of Trade toiled on in stress, made sure of daily meals by securing monthly meal-tickets, sweated, struggled, schemed, solicited, envied the dead their empty, profitless glory, and the "discovered" their prosperity, cherished a hope of profitable glory for themselves, and in the end probably came to realize, with Father Ryan, that "each ideal that shines like a star on life's wave is wrecked on the shores of the real, and sleeps like a dream in the grave."

Didn't Whistler's "Philip of Spain" sell the other day for \$25,200, and didn't Whistler have to battle most of his life with the bailiffs? Names!



DR. WILLIAM SMITH FORBES  
By Thomas Eakins

Sales and signatures! Poor Blakelock was to-day recognized as one of the master colorists of America. Stress sapped his sanity. He died a mental wreck in an asylum, and a subscription list was started on the grounds to relieve the widow's want. A friend of the Observer was invited recently, he said, by an Eastern "patron of art" whose name is known throughout the country as a "connoisseur" and "collector," to visit his gallery. Two Blakelocks were shown. "They must have cost a goodly sum," ventured the visitor. "The poor devil was hard up, and I gave him \$40," replied this "patron of art." That represented the man's appreciation of art with an at that time obscure name. And still, to the tune of millions, the sale of signatures went merrily on; still the dead slept on in dust their sleep of eternity, etc. Turn back and re-read the preceding paragraph of this report. Just the other day, the Observer said he saw water-colors bearing the name

of Israels, that might, by courtesy, have done credit to an academy student, offered at a fancy price and finding ready customers; and better water-colors with the name of Ritschel offered at sane prices and wanting purchasers. No reflection on Israels, the Observer explained, for every artist did poor things as well as good; no laudation of Ritschel, for a host of earnest painters were doing things worth the price asked. But simply another instance of names, names, nothing but—little but—names. *Vanitas vanitatum.*

*A propos* of all this, the Observer wanted to tell a story. He knew a Western multimillionaire, one of the quick-rich brand, who was talked into buying the library of a noted divine, deceased, a man of brains and culture. He was pumped full, by the salesman, of convenient shop-talk phrases—"silk-sewn," "Levant morocco," "hand-tooled,"

"tree-calf," and the like. Later he invited a common-sense judge to his home, and rehearsed his lesson. "Harry," said the judge, after listening patiently to the parrot-tongued dissertation on book-dress, without a single syllable of reference to book-content—"Harry, you ought to be a collector of picture-frames." That was the way of the average picture-collector, the Observer insisted. He didn't *buy* pictures; he was *sold* pictures. He was led to believe that a collection worthy of the name didn't merit mention without its containing a So-and-So, and a So-and-so, and a So-and-So. In default of an original, a creditable copy that would pass current as an original, might fill the bill. But he *must* have a So-and-So, and a So-and-So, and a So-and-So. And he got one.

God help art, the Observer ejaculated, if its golden age was in the past, and its highest achievement was a thing of the dim and musty yester-



THE YELLOW ROBE  
By Walter MacEwen

days, a matter of encyclopædic record. God help artists if the *régime* of signatures continued, and the favored few bulletined by Trade had a prior lien on popularity and purses. Didn't the artists, the upper and the under dog alike, all have a chance at the purse-strings?



MOTHER AND CHILD

By Louise Cox

one of the Dilettanti ventured. Most assuredly, retorted the Observer, in the same sense that the Declaration gives us all the same rights to life liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — which we *don't* enjoy. The reign of signatures was the genesis of fakes and the parent of pot-boilers, he said. And so long as people with more cash than culture, and more devotion to fashion than to art set up the approved lists of names like little tin gods on a mantel, and puled prayers before them according to a prescribed ritual, so long would they have furnished to them fakes galore and pot-boilers to their heart's content. Paint out your signatures, the Observer suggested, and watch the slump in prices for some idols of the day, and the breaking of eclipse

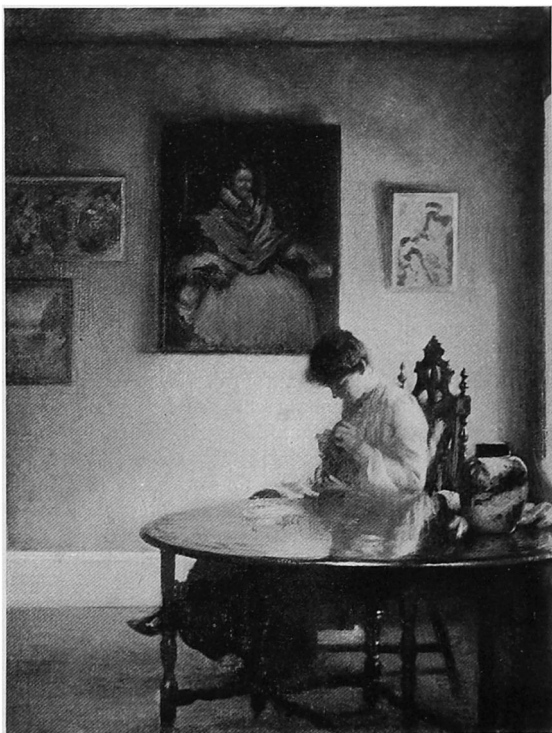
for many a hidden light. The tables would be turned. Speculative interest would be revised, and perchance art appreciation revolutionized.

When will our public buy pictures because they represent an ideal and not a name, a sentiment and not a reputation? the Observer reiterated. It might be that America was in swaddling-clothes as regards matters of art, and it was certainly true that it had an ambition to wear pants. But was n't there cloth enough at home to make knickerbockers—if not trousers? The forces of Congress and corruption were marshaled to protect and

promote such artistic home products as pork, pig-iron and wood-pulp, and at the same time the wealth of the nation was going forth annually in millions to enrich the supply-houses of "old masters"—with or without pedigrees; fatten the foreign producers of spurious antiques; and keep busy a horde of Old World makers of fakes and pot-boilers—all to the detriment of the native ability our "patrons of art" express a desire to foster.

Was this a credit to our sense of equity and our business acumen? Was n't this fever of the freshly rich to crowd our public and private galleries with the "masterpieces" of the Old World the tommy-rot of the interested? The sale of signatures, the Observer insisted, was like the sale of life-insurance policies—not one policy-holder in ten thousand sought the agent; the agent sought the policy-holder, and usually sold what he talked up. One got Equitable; another, Mutual; another, New York Life. And so in art matters, one man took a policy in Blommers; another in Thaulow; another, in Rubens (?); another, in Ridgway Knight. There had recently been quite a shake-up in insurance circles, and Mutual's business was reported to have fallen off \$47,000,000 in twelve months as a consequence. Wouldn't it be well to have a shake-up in art interests? It would, at least, tend to show how many of the tin gods of popularity would stand a seismic shock. A possible surprise to collectors!

But what would the dealers do, queried another of the Dilettanti, if



GIRL CROCHETING  
By Edmund C. Tarbell



you unprop the idols — the signatures? Do, echoed the Observer; they would all do from necessity what many of them — and among the lot, the most prosperous ones at that — have already begun to do from policy — they would talk up *good art* instead of exploited *names* and undertake to swing public taste — taste was not the right word, craze or fad was the term — into new channels. What did Durand-Ruel do? A Frenchman, he naturally favored French art; and a good judge and tolerable prophet, he singled out Monet and his group to push and make prosper. Result? A Monet that went begging a few years ago at \$50 was now snapped up at \$5,000 — and the artist lived to profit by his well-earned popularity. Could n't the same thing, should n't the same thing, be done for a score or two of men of genius, now unknown or little known — both at home and abroad, for the Observer was not bigoted — and the tide turned from fakes, forgeries, pot-boilers, and all other such factory products, to art that merited being extolled — but was n't — and artists who pleaded to be grub-staked — but ought to live and prosper on ready sales. Names! Sales and signatures! Names, names, nothing but — little but — names! *Vanitas vanitatum!*

And then again, the Observer deprecated the inane hobby of peopling our galleries at extravagant prices with representative "genuines" from foreign lands — ransacking church and cloister, gallery, town-hall, home, on the theory that an example of So-and-so — honestly or surreptitiously gotten — was a guide and inspiration to home talent. He declared emphatically that it was not. Was an example of Sir Joshua's bad drawing, for instance, — even if it did cost \$25,000 or \$50,000 — an inspiration worth while for American portraitists? Show him, the Observer demanded, an American artist worth the paper to eulogize him on, who was the product of foreign inspiration or the creature of foreign influences. What was the debt of Martin, Inness, Wyant, Bierstadt, Hart, Minor, Moran, to the Old World, and its treasured masterpieces? Did Homer get one hint for his superb seascapes from the marine-painters of Europe? Were Davis, Murphy, Ochtman, copyists or hint-followers? All that was worth bragging about in them or in their work *inherited in them, and had to come out of them*. The fact that the Metropolitan Art Museum had this and Mrs. Jack Gardner had that; that the Corcoran Art Gallery exhibited thus and Walters of Baltimore exhibited so; that the Boston Museum owned such and J. Pierpoint Morgan owned such-like — all this was a minus quantity in their art. The millions spent for examples of Old World art were, the Observer thought, millions mostly wasted, from the standpoint of legitimate American art development. Better, he said, let the student visit the Old World — he'd get there some way, if he wanted to, and a little struggle never hurt a sturdy soul — than to squander millions to bring over a few sorry specimens of foreign "master-work," — most of which went for decades, at least into, private galleries — for the inspiration and guidance of home talent, and then discourage and dwarf that home talent — in deference to signatures — by doling out to it a niggard pittance for its support.

What expatriated so many American artists, the Observer asked. Did Whistler, Abbey, Sargent, Bridgman, Gruppe, Gay, Vedder, Melchers, McEwen, Knight, renounce the land of their birth — their claim to American citizenship was a farce — in order that they might bask in the enriching sunshine of Europe's art glories? Rubbish! Did Knight, or Melchers,



THE BLACK FAN  
By Howard Gardiner Cushing

or McEwen, or Gay, or Bridgman give evidence of such absorption and reflect such glories? Would Abbey and Sargent be less Abbey and Sargent — except in point of emolument — had they stayed in this country? Primarily, the expatriation was a policy of profit — the art glories of the Old World had nothing to do with the case. Distance lent enchantment to the view, and robed the artist with a power that drew.

The Dilettanti thought such rank juggling of a poetic gem was about the limit, and hinted that the Observer with it should be willing to quit. In consenting to drop the subject — for the time, he was careful to say —

he begged to leave a question unanswered for his fellow-members to think about. Of the gross millions spent annually by Americans — institutions and individuals — for works of Art, what percentage of it went to the



A GENTLEWOMAN  
By J. Alden Weir

legitimate support and encouragement of American artists, or in any way tended toward the development of native talent? Go buy a microscope, the Observer suggested, to aid in the quest. And then as a parting shot — Trade made the Idols, and — names, names, nothing but — little but — names! And still the dead slept on in dust their sleep of eternity, little dreaming, — Time, called the Dilettanti.

REPORTED BY THE SALON'S SECRETARY.

